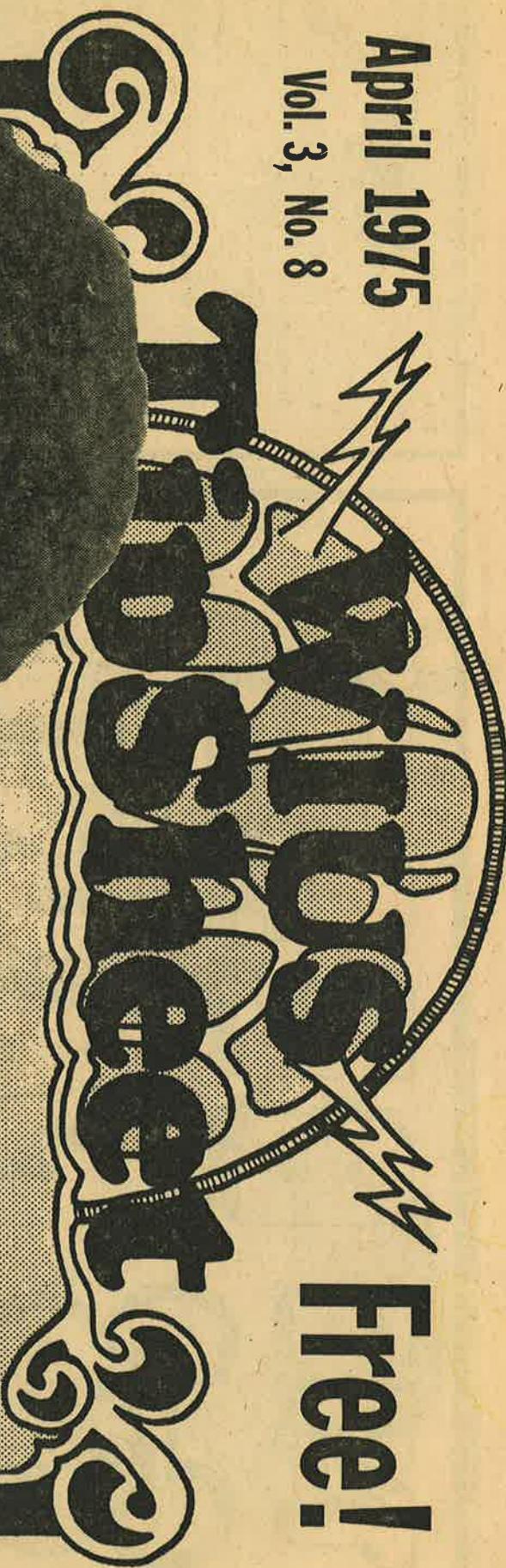


April 1975

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## Dave Baker Interview

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SOUL, JAZZ & BLUES ISSUE

# Dave Baker - Jazzman

**By Greg Barman**

Dave Baker is a very busy man. Baker, head of the Jazz Department of I.U.'s School of Music, is one of the country's foremost jazz educators. He has taught jazz at I.U. since 1966. The author of several widely regarded books on jazz, Baker's commitment to jazz is total, on both local and national levels. He is a member of several jazz-education committees, and travels frequently to speak and perform. Baker plays bass and cello; he used to play trombone until a jaw impairment from an early-60s auto accident forced him to give up the instrument.

His music composition credits are numerous. Besides a flood of pieces for his student jazz bands and ensembles, Baker has been commissioned to write for many outside orchestras and performing organizations. Recently, J.C. Penney Co. commissioned him to compose a piece that will be distributed to high school jazz bands nationwide for America's Bicentennial.

Raised in Indianapolis, Baker's background includes not only academia, but several years on the road with the bands of George Russell, Stan Kenton, and others. He is very aware of the challenges in teaching jazz.

The author is currently taking one of Baker's courses — M393, History of Jazz. Nearly 200 people are enrolled in the non-required course. Baker's busy teaching day starts early — 7:30 AM. This interview was held at 8:30 AM, March 19, 1975, in Dave Baker's office.

**Greg Barman:** *How the hell can you start a day at 7:30 AM?*

**Dave Baker:** Yeah, that's different, man. My day starts at five, though, so it's a little easier to deal with 7:30.

**How many courses do you teach?**

This semester I'm teaching 29 hours worth of courses . . .

**Isn't that kind of a lot for one prof?**

Yeah, it's about twice as much as you're supposed to teach, but I'm a one-man department. Until we get the other people it's going to be a little difficult. What I've tried to do is make sure that the people who are graduating . . . that these courses are being offered so they don't have to wait a semester or a year or two years to take these courses. As long as there's three or four people to take the course I go ahead and teach it, even if I have to teach it on Sunday or at night or whatever

**Do you end up teaching on Sundays?**

Oh, I teach six hours on Sunday and four hours on Saturday. It has to be done.

**How many assistants do you have?**

I have four T.A.'s. But obviously, you know . . . the people pay their money to take these courses, man, they don't expect to be with the T.A., even though the T.A.'s take a lotta weight off me because they are handling, like, assisting me in the teaching of the courses, grading papers, taking other bands, and things like this. So, it would be impossible without them.

**Now you came here in what, 1966?**

**Yeah, '66.**

**Were there many people teaching jazz around the country, in your type of position?**

No, this whole notion of jazz education is still relatively new, though every school of any import probably has some jazz courses being offered, at least a jazz band. There are probably, maybe a dozen that offer a jazz degree, and maybe of those four or five of them are major Universities — New England Conservatory, University of Utah, Miami University/Coral Gables, and of course, Berkeley and Indiana University are among the major Universities that offer a degree in jazz.

**You went here as an undergrad, right?**

And as a grad student.

**Majoring in composition?**

No, Music Education.

**Did you always want to become a teacher, or just go into the business and bump around in bands, or . . .**

I don't know where . . . I think I wanted to do everything that had to do with music, that's what it got down to.

**More and more jazz musicians are appearing on the scene with jazz degree now.**

Yeah, I think we're moving into a time when techniques have been codified, where I think that everybody is convinced now that it's possible to teach jazz, you know, so nobody's got any hangups. Like when I came up, of course, the consensus was that you couldn't teach it. And if you start with that as a premise then nobody's going to prepare to do that, you dig. So I think now by and large, you see colleges turning out a substantial portion of the people who are active in jazz, whether



Craig Owensby

the arts, from the standpoint of classical music, and I suspect when we're talking about the more esoteric music that's a part of jazz it's going to ultimately have to be subsidized if it's to survive.

**What about rock, with its strong commercial base? Do you see rock becoming uh, legitimized?**

Well, I don't think it has to be that, I think by it's legitimization. I think it's a cult kind of music, you know, and it's going to reach more people; it's a music that is seen as a voice of a certain segment of the population, just like blues is seen as a voice of another segment of the population. All of these come from the same sources that produced jazz. Jazz is, of course, like I said, a more highly specific kind of listening music than, say, the music which is functional, like rock, jazz-rock, and blues, rhythm & blues, you know.

**Do you take time to listen to rock?**

I listen to all music, man. I'd like to think that, you know, because I've got a daughter who's 16 and two nephews, 16 and 15, who live with me, that I probably am as on top of what's going on musically in that genre as I am in what's going on in jazz. But I make it a practice to listen to all kinds of music. That's why I feel that I'm comfortable with every kind of music, from Charley Pride and Buck Owens to the Who, to Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, and Schoenberg, and Krenek and Webern, and everybody else, cause it's all music.

**Someone like you, then, is kinda rare — the total musician, the total teacher . . .**

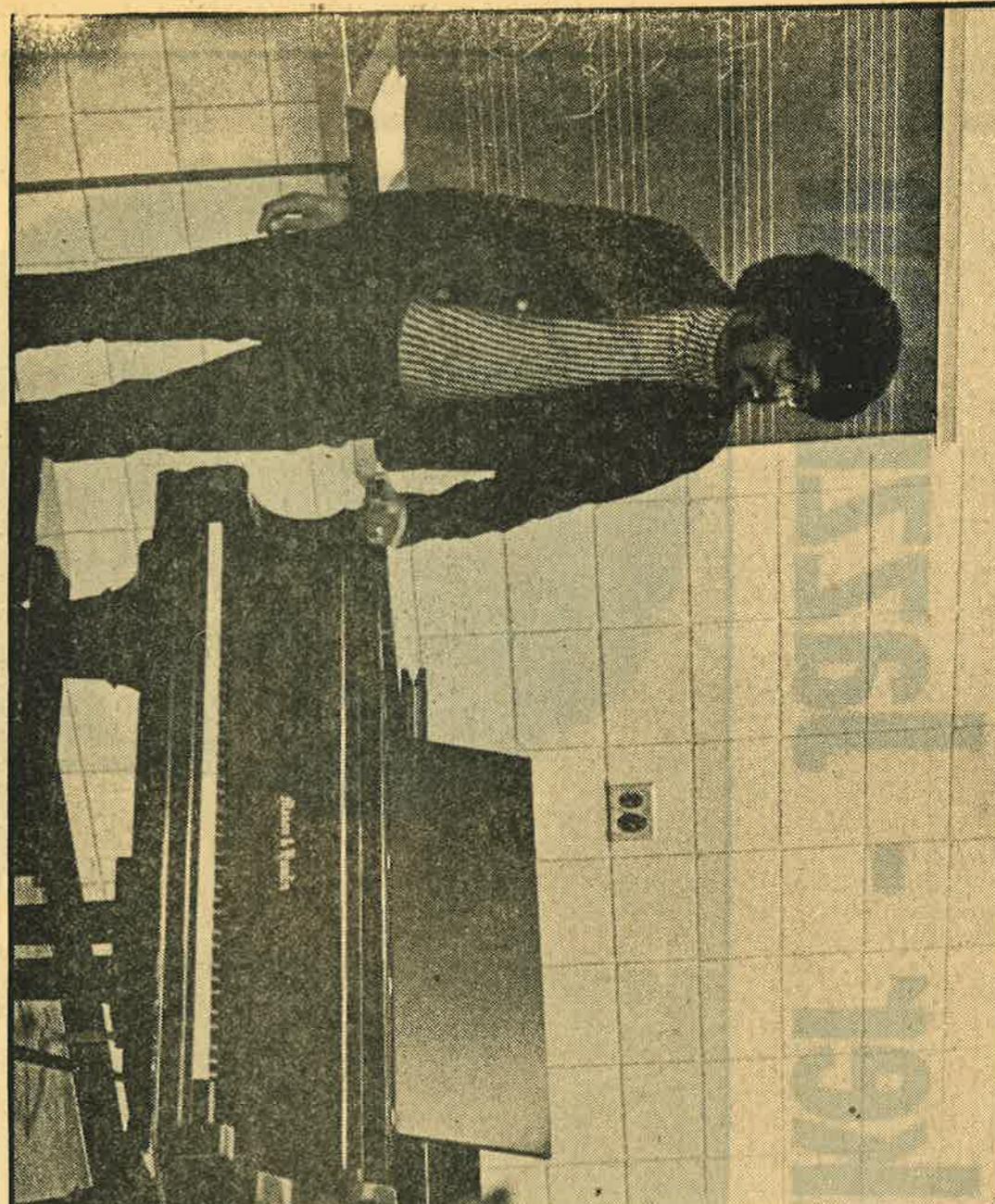
Not so rare, anymore . . . rare if you're talking about Indiana University, just because this is another concept of superior and inferior music that exists here. For instance, I think you can count the times on . . . the faculty members who would ever go to a jazz concert . . . I mean in the Music School — I think we do have a large faculty contingent across campus that attends concerts, but I don't think I've ever, in the last

(Continued on next page)

So a large part of the people will probably never be reached. And there's not much you can do about it.

No, because that demands a kind of whole restructuring in the way people think, a whole re-educating of the masses, and I don't think we're set up to do that kind of thing, I'm not even sure that it's desirable.

I think that we're going to always be about the business of subsidizing



Craig Owensby

five years, seen more than two faculty members at any given concert,

and yet the place is always packed. So I don't know . . . it's a question of taste — maybe they don't dig it . . . like I know in talking to some faculty, or hearing them talk — they don't address their comments to me — that much of the faculty who would never go to see their students play in the jazz band, which is acclaimed as one of the two or three top jazz bands irrespective of professional or otherwise in the country, who would never think about that, do find time to go down to, say, the Bluebird and hear John Von Ohlen bring a dance band down. So I guess it's a question of what you want, what you're looking for.

*But there's still a lot of snobbery around here as far as jazz is concerned?*

Oh, that's gonna always be, you know, I don't deal with that, that's fine. I wrote a relatively extensive article for *Black World* — I don't know if you know that, I'll let you read it — but it's an article where I talk about academia versus jazz. You know, we're talking about a music which has all kinds of odious connotations as far as the mainstream goes. We've been struggling for this many years to have it be a part of curriculums, to have it be recognized as a music which has all the same degrees of subtlety and degrees of importance as any other music. But, by and large at a place like Indiana University, and Indiana University is of course a microcosm of all universities, I don't think there's anybody that takes Duke Ellington seriously. But I happen to feel, as do Gunther Schuller and people like that, that Duke Ellington and Charles Ives are among the most important composers America has yet produced.

[Telephone rings . . . a call from a music department in Jamaica wanting Baker to visit.]

*Wasn't it hard to fit a jazz program in the constraints of what this music school had to offer when you first got here? I mean beyond a general jazz history course or general improvisation course . . .*

Well . . . yes and no. It seems to me that most universities already have the mechanics set up. I mean, the structures exist, it's just a question of initiating the program. Now the problem is the reluctance on the part of people to accept those new programs, you know. For instance, I've said so often in this class [IM393] that I'm glad to see a class this large in a non-required course, because it tells me that people realize they're being cheated . . . that they do need to know something about some other music except the music they've been exposed to . . . that they need to understand if we are in fact a part of a pan-style era, and a pan-style geographic setup, then we've got to be about the business of dealin' with other folks and other kinds of cultures, too.

On one hand, I guess, there's always the resistance to anything that's outside the norm, and then on the other hand you do have the mechanical setup that will accommodate it already.

*What you are saying in dealing with other cultures — is that a relatively new concept, or has it just been easier to come about because of the way people's thinking has changed in the last five years?*

People's thinking hasn't really changed in the last five years. Yeah, I think it's a little easier to deal with it now just because of the intrusion of the mass media; I think Marshall McLuhan has put it very well when he says we live in a global village. And it's no longer possible for us to ignore what's going on in a village in Vietnam, and what's happening somewhere in Yugoslavia . . . we just can't do it because, like, it's instant awareness, you know. The problem is, it's very, very difficult to break down provincialism and conventional kind of thought.

*But change is occurring faster, though, isn't it? I mean not just in music, but on all levels, period.*

Yeah, it's occurring faster but when you stop and think that it was not moving at all, then anything would be faster. 'Cause it was, I think, completely static, for years.

*What is the aim of the jazz program here? When someone leaves I.U. with a jazz degree, what has he had?*

I tried to design my program along what I figured to be sound educational objectives within any program. One, to produce an acculturated individual — somebody who is able to deal with the art-for-art's-sake kind of concepts, where you appreciate Duke Ellington from an artistic standpoint, you know what his contribution was, you understand that Charlie Parker was about the business of a socio-political-economic result — a cat who can deal with music in all of its facets from an artistic standpoint. Second, to produce a very practical, hard kind of look at what it is to earn a living out there. So I'm trying to produce people who come out of here with the requisite skills to play, to compose, to be A&R people, to be critics, to be teachers, to be designers of programs, to be administrators . . . in other words, to earn a living. But by the same token I cannot do that at the expense of producing somebody who has an appreciation of what this music is about.

*That's kind of hard to do, I'd think. Because college is such an isolated environment, as opposed to going out on the street and hustling . . .*

Yeah, but I think it can be made more relevant, it can be made a viable means for moving into the community, you know, I don't see any reason why there needs to be that schism that normally exists between cap and . . . you know, town and gown. We see that it is that way, but more and more . . . like certainly in my area I've got no choice but to have these cats out in the street trying to play gigs, and doing whatever they want. The nature of the music is such that they're going to do that.

*Is that what your more advanced students are doing?*

Yeah, most of them are about playing. Obviously they have the laboratory situation here, but then they're out in the street playing gigs, traveling with bands, and doing whatever's necessary to equip them to earn a living.

*Where do they go once they get a degree out of here . . . like, where have some of them gone?*

We're graduating our first class now with jazz degrees. For instance, I've got people traveling in the summer with bands like, uh, Tommy Dorsey and Glenn Miller and that. I've got other cats who are on the Woody Herman Band, and Stan Kenton Band. I've got players who are . . . and I think the small group players are going to be the more important business . . . like for instance Ellen Seeling, one of my trumpet players, just finished doing an album with a group called Isis, and she'll be traveling with that band. Very soon John Clayton is going to be leaving here, playing with Monty Alexander. So, like, the kids go into good gigs.

Others of them will be, like I said, A&R people, will be copyists, cats playing on big bands, cats teaching — we've already got a number of people who have left who are cognate field people, who have gone out teaching, and doing this kind of thing. So we figure we've got a viable program.

*So I imagine you feel pretty good about that — that you can send them into various areas.*

What happens, too, is that our attrition rate will be quite high. Because I don't see any reason for a cat to hang around after he's got the things he needs to leave. There are others who need four years of matriculation. Others are here two years, and then they need to be with Art Blakey or Miles Davis or somebody, so I'll say, "Hey, cut the umbilical cord and get out there and do it," you know.

*So the degree is not necessarily an indication that . . .*

No, it's not an end in itself, it's a means to an end.

*Good for some people and not good for others . . .*

Well I think everybody could profit from having it, but some of 'em are going to get it at a different time.

*Who is your most famous student, Freddie Hubbard?*

Freddie's probably the best known of the students, but I number among my students a lot of people who are . . . well, James Moody is one of my students, he uses all my books and we talk all the time about what I'm doing, so he knows my material and uses my material.

*He's really an underrated musician.*

Yeah, except not with musicians, he's not, you know. And I count, like, Virgil Jones — who's on Thad's Band [Thad Jones and Mel Lewis], and is one of the busiest trumpet players in New York, and Larry Ridley, who's head of the music department at Livingston College. Ted Dunbar is a student, and he's one of the top guitarists in the business. So, it's very difficult to say who. Freddie has probably gone on to more acclaim than any other student I've had, but there are a whole bunch of dudes out there doin' it.

*Who else has come out of Indianapolis, that you have associated with?*

Well, Wes Montgomery was one of the most famous of all the musicians to come. J. J. Johnson is from Indianapolis, Leroy Vinnegar, Carl Perkins, Freddie Ridley, Virgil Jones, Brian Trenton — one of my trombone students who took my place on George Wilson's Band . . . man, we could go on forever. All the Montgomery Brothers — Buddy, Wes, and Monk. Killer Ray Appleton — another very heavy drummer, David Young — the tenor saxophonist, Jimmy Spaulding . . . off the top of my head, man . . . Bill Jennings — the great guitarist who played with Bill Doggett and all of those bands. So there are more cats than you could think of, man. Indianapolis has been like a fountainhead.

*It seems to be underrated in that respect, then. Because people tend to think of Chicago, New York, or maybe Cleveland or Detroit . . .*

*Indianapolis has had its share of the great musicians.*

At least in the press — which is what I've been exposed to, Indy and the black population that is there has been kind of ignored.

*So you've been teaching outside the confines of the University?*

Oh, really. I started teaching around 1960, 1961. You know, while I was still on the road I was teaching.

*Is teaching more than just . . . or was it then . . . more than just a source of additional income?*

Oh no, teaching has always been central to my existence.

*Why? What do you get out of it?*

Well, I grow, and I learn. I consider myself a professional student. And I think that a cat, if he's got something to give, he's got an obligation to give that. I know all the shit that I went through from other people who helped me indirectly. A lot of people, I would say, "Hey I need help, show me how to do this, show me how to do that," and they taught me informally, like, in the school of the streets. And I figure, well, eventually somebody's gonna have to put these things down in concrete form, and give 'em back. And I felt like I had as much right to do that as anybody else, so I did. And do.

*I'm very interested in that street aspect of your background.*

Well, there were no other options. When I was coming up as a player, man, the only place you could learn to play was in the streets, 'cause there were no schools.

*Did you go from Indy to New York?*

Now, I came out of college into, well, a lot of bands. I played with Lionel Hampton, I went out with Stan Kenton in '56, I went out with Maynard Ferguson in '57 or '58. In 1959, I joined George Russell's small group. I was right at the beginning of it when it was formulated. I played with Buddy Johnson, and almost every big band of any importance, and then joined George Russell. And that really was the break, through because it was [my] first exposure in a small group thing where we really were recording and playing a lot.

*His music was adventurous for the time.*

Oh, yeah — it's adventurous for any time . . . but I'd go out during the summers when I was in college, but then in '57 I actually left and joined Kenton, and that was my first major, even though I played with Lionel before . . .

*Was Kenton on the road all the time, or was he based in New York?*

He was never based in New York. He was based in Los Angeles but he was on the road when I joined. Kenton is very concerned with jazz education, isn't he?

Yeah, he's one of the pioneers, in the whole jazz education circle.

I moved to New York in 1958 or '59. I had lived in New York in '57 before... Skid Hampton and I lived together out behind the Apollo Theater on 126th Street. I was playing with different small groups and big bands. And then I went back to live there again in 1960 when I went permanent with George Russell. I had lived in Los Angeles two or three years before that for some months...

*How did this teaching position come about here?*

Well, I went to school here, and I guess most of the students who were here when I moved back to Indianapolis were my private students. And when Jerry Coker decided to leave, Jerry recommended me — Jerry and I are close friends — and then of course the students wanted me here, too, because they were my students already anyway. So, it was no big thing, they knew me...

*And it just kinda gravitated?*

Yeah.

*Who was Jerry Coker?*

'Cat who really wrote the first improvisation books. Jerry went to school with me down here, and then Jerry came back as a faculty member. And Jerry still is one of the prominent cats in this business. The book, *Improvising Jazz*, is still probably the best selling of all the improvisation books, 'cause it's an inexpensive book through Prentice-Hall. Jerry is, as far as I'm concerned, one of the giants in this music as far as education... well, period. He's a helluva player, helluva teacher.

*It must have been kind of a shock to move from New York to Bloomington, Indiana, to teach...*

Not really, man. I'm Indiana, ya know... I was born and raised here, man. All of my activity has been somehow or another connected with Indiana since 1950. So it was no big thing for me to move back here and start to apply my trade.

*Was there some prejudice when you got here as far as the jazz program went...*

Oh, that goes without saying. There are people who can't use jazz, who don't think jazz has any reason to be a part of the University. It's been minimized, primarily because we've had a sympathetic administration. The administration is committed, really, I think, to what we're about.

*Does being a teacher help your writing?*

Oh, I couldn't write books... if that's what you mean.

*Books, or music...*

Oh, anything that stimulates thought helps everything else. I could never write books if I weren't teaching. And I doubt very seriously if I would be this productive as a composer if I weren't about a situation where everything you write gets played, and where you have to write all the time because the kids need it. So it's kind of a two-way street, they feed each other.

*How do you find time to write if you're doing all the teaching and working with bands?*

Sleep little. I'm serious.

*Do you set aside time to write, or does it just happen?*

No, it just happens. Almost all of my writing now is on commission anyway, so I don't have to build in the time, it just becomes a necessity. You know? And when you got commissions hanging over your head, you do it.

*Do you lock yourself in a room with a bunch of score paper around... I'm sleeping, I write when I'm driving, I write, period.*

Your pieces have been played by numerous organizations outside the realm of the University.

In fact, most of my performances are from outside the University. I've got three premieres coming up next month [April], in fact, of what I figure are major works.

*What are they?*

I have a new cello concerto for Janos Starker, which is being premiered on the 21st with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, and the new tuba concerto which is being premiered here on the 10th of April with Harvey Phillips — a multi-media piece, and then there's a J.C. Penney commission on the 14th of April in Washington. And there's another one... I can't remember what it is...

*I imagine though they are larger, orchestra works, they are all jazz-tinged. Any improvisation?*

In the piece for Penney's, yes. The other two pieces are strictly straight-ahead. Well, the tuba piece is a jazz piece... it's everything. And, anymore, my writing tends to transcend labels. It's very difficult, I mean, labels are always post-facto anyway. I don't start out to write such-and-such a piece, I write a piece and then somebody else labels it, you know. What impresses me most about you as a teacher is the enthusiasm that you communicate to students. Like while you're up there listening to the records, you're diggin' the music...

You're in a position to communicate the depth that you have — the academic depth, the street depth. Your students are largely white. Well, it's about being human, man. I write the books for my courses most of the time — I'm about the business of writing a history book now, but I don't teach from those books. I put that in books for people to read. And I teach from my personal experiences and other people's personal experiences that I can capture. Because it's folly, man. Why

have you buy a book if all I'm gonna do is follow the book? That's why I try to tell people that you can't take a class of mine and do well in it unless you're there. Because 90% of what I cover is not something you can get from reading a book. That's what teaching is about to me.

*Are you concerned with keeping contact with what's going on outside?*

Oh, yeah, if you can't stay on top of what's happenin' out there you can't be a teacher. That's why I think that I.U. [School of Music] has such a strong faculty, is that everybody's expected to keep doin' what they're known for. So that a cat like a Janos Starker, who is a hell of a teacher, is expected to stay out there and stay one of the two or three best cello players in the world, by being out there, you know. And the same thing for other teachers — they expect us to play, and record, and do what we do, that's why we're valuable to them.

*That's good that they think that way.*

Yeah, I'm... knocked out by it.

*Do you do a lot of traveling?*

I'm not quite a bit. Both speaking, playing clinics, and... plus I'm on half-a-dozen commissions which have the business of perpetuating this music. I'm co-chairman of the National Endowment of the Arts Jazz Panel along with Gene Ritchie. I'm chairman of the Advisory Committee on Jazz to the Kennedy Center. I'm on the National Music Council Panel, along with Gene Ritchie. I'm on the State Department group which helps determine which group go overseas. So... it's about total commitment to the music, and to what the causes are. [At this point several students appeared at Baker's office door for an informal jazz arranging class, ending the interview.]

# You'll probably have to sign up.

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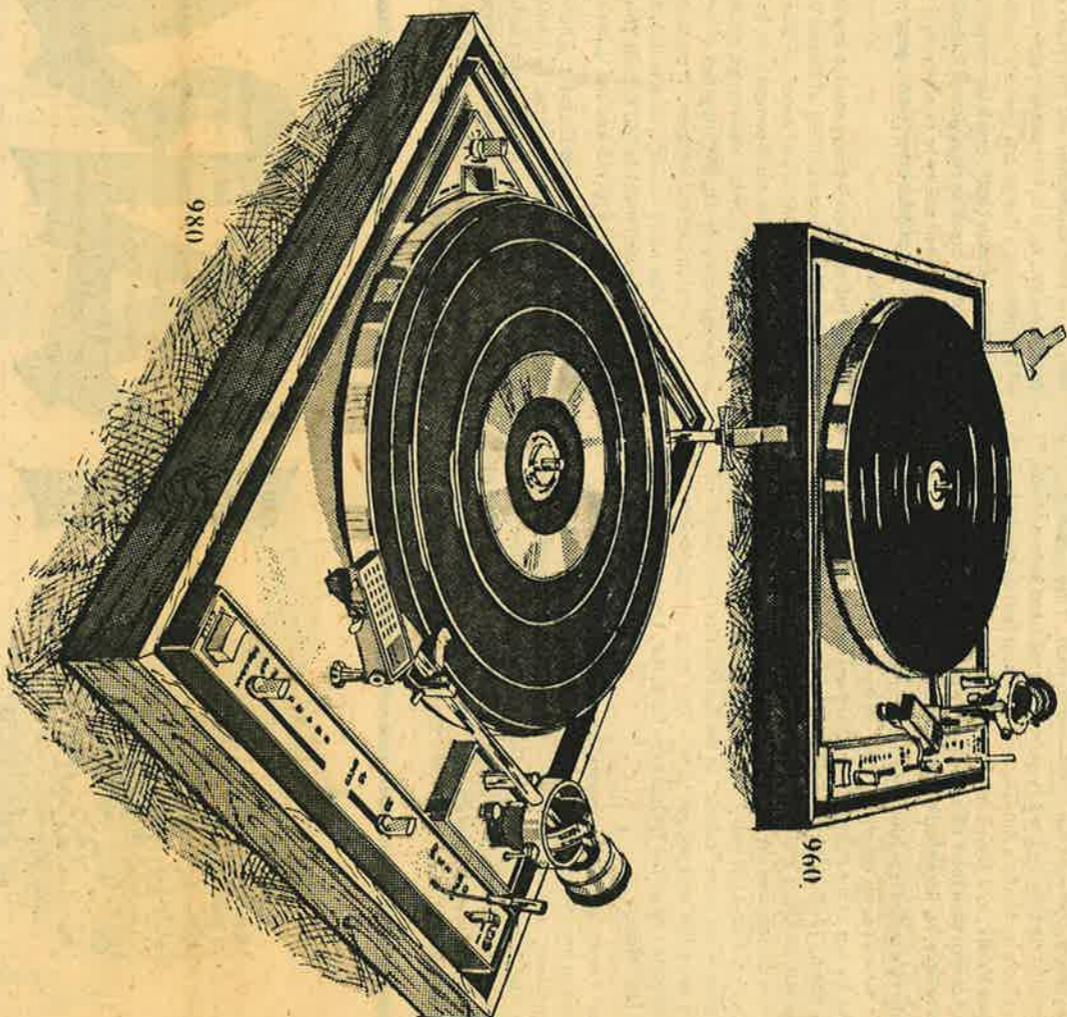
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